The idea that the Pentateuch was not composed by Moses but was the work of several later authors is called “The Documentary Theory,” more accurately, “Hypothesis.” Its origination actually began with the Elohist’s view that terms such as eloahim and el were alternate names for Yahweh. Jews of the Middle Ages had raised these generic terms and titles to the rank of personal names in a bizarre attempt to conceal the sacred name and to use these words as substitutes. As a result, men began to read the books of Moses as if there were multiple names for the almighty.

In the 12th century C.E., a Jewish scholar from Spain, named Abraham ibn Ezra, first proposed multiple authorship of the Pentateuch (Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, chaps. VII-X). Abraham, faced with specific passages that pointed to a later editor’s hand, concluded that Moses did not write all of the five books attributed to him. His views set in motion a host of other critics who questioned Moses’ authorship. These critics included Jews and even Christians like Martin Luther. Christian humanists and philosophers like Masius (died 1573) and Thomas Hobbes (1651) added fuel to the fire. Isaac de la Peyrere (1655) then suggested that Moses had not even written the five books attributed to him. His views set in motion a host of other critics who questioned Moses’ authorship. These critics included Jews and even Christians like Martin Luther. Christian humanists and philosophers like Masius (died 1573) and Thomas Hobbes (1651) added fuel to the fire. Isaac de la Peyrere (1655) then suggested that Moses had not even written the five books, but rather several other men had.

As the result of Abraham ibn Ezra and some of those who followed him, the developing Documentary Hypothesis gained momentum under the Dutch Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza (Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, chap. VII to X). With a backdrop of religious misinterpretation, a lack of understanding of the parable nature of Scriptures, and limited knowledge of Hebrew, Spinoza concluded that all of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Nehemiah, was composed by the scribe Ezra in the 5th century B.C.E.

Spinoza was followed by Richard Simon, a French priest who wished to emphasize the importance of the Church over Scriptures. Simon argued that Scriptures were so laden with inconsistency in order and chronology, and with stylistic differences, that it was impossible for Moses to have been the only author. He reasoned, as a result, that Catholic tradition was a more secure basis for faith than Scriptures! Though officially denied by the Church, his sentiments nonetheless reflected the true underlying prejudice of most members of the Judaeo-Christian and Muslim faiths, a fact demonstrated by their actions rather than their words.

The debate was now raging, but unfortunately, only false alternatives were presented—the various sides knowing little about which they spoke. Leclerc, a protestant, replied to Simon that he had gone too far but conceded that portions of the Pentateuch were written by scribes later than Moses. Then came the French physician, Jean Astruc, who published a work in 1753 entitled Conjectures About the Original Memoranda It Appears Which Moses Used to Compose the Book of Genesis. Astruc claimed that the deity was known by two different names, Yahve [Yahweh] and Elohim [eloahim] and that these two different names were the products of two different traditions. He suggested that the repetitions, contradictions, and chronological problems that scholars had come to “believe” actually arose as the result of the interweaving of these two different ancient sources. These sources were more ancient than Moses, he noted, but Moses brought them together.

After Astruc, there arose men of more considerable skill, like the German scholars Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (Einleitung, 1780–1783) and K. D. Ilgen (Die Urkunden des Jerusalemischem Tempelarchivs in ihrer Urgestalt, 1798). Then came Alexander Geddes (Introduction to the Pentateuch and Joshua, 1792), who proposed a fragmentary theory for the origin of the Pentateuch. He held that it was developed during the Solomonic era from many separate fragments dating back to the time of Moses and before. These men were followed by a work published in 1806–1807 by W. M. L. De Wette, entitled Beiträge zur Einleitung in das
From such work, the Tanach scholars came to accept the hypothesis that the Pentateuch was the result of the blending together of J (Yahweh), E (eloahim), D (Deuteronomy), and P (Priestly Code) documents. The belief that there were four major documents that lay behind the five books of Moses is now almost universally accepted by biblical scholars. But one must keep in mind that the thrust of the work of these men has been to attack the credibility of Scriptures. This assault comes from both religious and secular scholarship.

Many of the proponents of this multi-authorship view are priests and rabbis, whose purpose is to extol the virtues of “the Church” and their own respective religious “traditions” over the value of Scriptures. In their mind-set, what they perceive as “contradictions” in Scriptures serve to justify their reliance on “Church,” i.e. “Christian,” Moslem, or “Jewish” traditions. Human derived religious philosophy and interpretation is then perceived as a more secure basis for their faith. Though claiming a “belief” in Scriptures, their actions show that their true intent is to justify their own respective religious interpretations and traditions as well as their own personal views.

It was as a result of this attack on the credibility of the books of Moses that the modern Elohist school and their Documentary Hypothesis gained popularity. Both the secular and religious Elohists had found a vested interest in discrediting the Pentateuch. The secular scholars pointed to their findings as justification for not giving any credence to Scriptures. At the same time, the religious Elohists use it to attack the Scriptural doctrine that there is only one personal name for our heavenly father.